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Extracts from Mrs Bones

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Abstract

When the Guerrillas Came

Reading Coffee

Nomads

To be remembered

Broken

Pretend

Miranda Hoplaros

Extracts from *Mrs Bones*

WHEN THE GUERRILLAS CAME

Mr Baron says we must hide under the beds. The guerrillas are coming. They are going to get Mrs Baron first. She's old and can't crawl under the bed like us. In a way her old age is good for us. When she does her rounds of the dorms — lights out time — we can hear her slow shoes scraping the gravel. We stop being naughty, feel our way back into our beds and share our laughter with the pillow — face down.

Under the bed is dumb. When we play hide-and-seek that is the first place we look. Under the bed. I would feel safer in the bamboo trees where the witches hide at Halloween or in the woods where we practise shooting the cans and do our cross-country running. But it's dark and maybe the guerrillas are there.

Dad dug a deep ditch in the garden. I didn't see him shovelling but when we got home, it was there. This awkward looking empty space was our trench. But it rained and filled with water so we couldn't hide there. We practised hiding at our neighbour's house. Their cement trench had a flower patch on top, stairs going down and a peeping gap for the watchman. Of course we never went there when the guerrillas came, it was too far. We hid under the bed.

The school is empty. Everyone has gone home, everyone except us. The guerrillas are coming but we stayed. Mr and Mrs Baron, Roger and Colin have nowhere to go. I don't ask why. It's not polite to ask questions. Roger is in my class and we play 'I spy' from under the bed but the game is over soon because we can't see much from where we are positioned and Mr Baron tells us to be quiet. He's holding a pistol, so when he tells us to be silent, we stop.

My younger brother, like Colin, is only five and he has fallen asleep. Mr Baron is worried because he's snoring. We don't stand a chance with the guerrillas. I can't see my sister. My older brother is not with us anymore. He grew up and was sent to high school in town.

Nobody told us why dad didn't come to get us. We are always the last to go home for holidays. We hang off the gates, kicking the sand, looking down the empty road waiting for the station wagon — us and those Italian Alberto boys. They won't have to wait anymore. They were blown up in an ambush the last time they went home.

READING COFFEE

I watch them make coffee. They boil some water after measuring the quantity in a small coffee cup. The women seem to like it sweet, to break its bitter taste, so a teaspoon of sugar is added together with one of thick ground coffee. Relatives and friends store bags of coffee in their suitcases — a return gift from Cyprus. They let the mixture boil till it foams. The cup is blackened when it is poured. The coffee is for adults. I've heard the women scare boys into not drinking coffee by telling them they won't grow moustaches if they drink it. It tastes like the sand I sometimes eat to make myself ill so I will miss Greek school.

They sip it slowly, sometimes dipping dry *koulouri* inside. The sesame seeds drift apart and if it's too hot, chunks of *koulouri* sink to the bottom. When lipstick smudged lips have separated the liquid from the thick particles, the women put the saucer over the lid, swirl it a couple of times and let the contents drip down the sides. The church doesn't like it when women read coffee cups but they make out the shapes they see in order to pass time.

Mom, Niki, Androulla and Flora are sitting under the tree in our garden. Mom is inspecting the cups individually, twisting them around. She pokes her finger in the cup. 'Do you see that?' She looks for the roads first. 'I see a long road. Have you planned a trip somewhere?' A trail of coffee means a road but a long journey could mean any road journey inside Rhodesia. The distances are far. Niki's cup isn't good this time. She has drunk too much liquid and a dry patch clings to the bottom of the cup, defying gravity. 'Something is bothering you.' Niki puts her finger in the mountain of sorrow and breaks up her worries. Next, mom looks for babies, especially in the cups of women who have just been married. Androulla is a new arrival in Rhodesia. 'You will receive a letter or news from abroad.' Each cup is its own kaleidoscope of fate.

As mom reads the coffee, the women listen. They drown out their inner voice in the froth that surfaces the cup. They take the voice they hear to be their own.

It's the same in Rhodesia. We hear things from other people. We don't know what is happening in the bush, outside Rhodesia, the fighting inside Cyprus. We depend on information from others.

NOMADS

I was born in Bindura. Four months later I had a Rhodesian passport. Above ‘signature waived due to age of holder’ there is a black and white photograph of me. I’m wearing a white jersey that mom made for me. On the jersey is a pin with a row of three golden objects that is given to Greek Orthodox babies by their godparents when they are christened. One is in the shape of a heart and the other a cross. The stamp of the Ministry of Internal Affairs hides the third. I’m a well fed baby with a height of 1 foot 8 inches.

A Rhodesian passport has limitations. Nobody wants us — only the South Africans who stamp our passport at Beitbridge. They leave their mark in purple like the flowers of the Jacaranda tree. The entry stamp to South Africa is a circle. It has the word entry written in Afrikaans as well — *Binnekoms*. On the way back from South Africa there is a purple square saying *Vertrek / Left*.

The rest of the world is not as friendly as the South Africans. Mom gets weary of waiting with us. It takes a few days to get to her home. We have to change aeroplanes and they don’t let Rhodesians out of the airport so we have to sleep on the floor with the other Rhodesians until our flight comes. It’s boring being a Rhodesian. By the time we reach mom’s village in Cyprus, she’s so tired of us that she sends us to the local school to remember our Greek again. We are surrounded by the whole school that comes out to see the children from Africa. In the classroom, I stare out the window.

We are not allowed to take any money out of the country either. Mom gets body checked but they don’t look at us. We are wearing heavy gold earrings that tear away at our flesh and diamond rings on our fingers.

In July 1977, my Rhodesian passport is renewed. The photograph remains the same. The new expiry date is 1982. The Rhodesian Passport Office didn’t think that in 1980 Rhodesia would no longer be valid. The country had expired. We’re stuck for some time between Rhodesia and Zimbabwe.

TO BE REMEMBERED

The church in the Greek book is like the one in Salisbury. There is a heavy red carpet that has been stamped by hundreds of feet leaving behind traces from outside — dirt and dust trails from around Rhodesia. Mothers and fathers are dragging their neat children by the hand in paper cut-out formations. The grandmothers wear black and their grey hair is covered, and their wrinkles speak of their hardship. The men are wearing polished shoes and freshly pressed suits.

Inside the chandeliers dangle from the fragile roof, each branch bearing dozens of crystal diamonds. At the end of the route sits a lighted candle.

I sit on the grass, look at the pictures and read the letters, words and sentences over and over again until they become so familiar I can say them to the air. Further along, the pages are darkened by the priest and his tall hat — good enough to be a magician's hat with a rabbit hidden in its seams. There are pictures of figs in baskets, winds that play with dresses, natural treasures from the insides of the sea and swallows feeding their young in nests.

The picture I look at most is the postman. He's wearing an important hat that sits on his curls. A red bag crosses over his shoulders. The children sit on a log being good — the kind of good that means there is something to look forward to. Their eyes are wide, ears open, waiting for their name to be called out — to be remembered.

BROKEN

We get to eat a gingerbread man on our birthday at school — a small brown man with blue icing buttons and a painted face. I lick off the icing first, leaving the man soggy, naked and without character. I then nibble into its body, starting from the legs upwards, until the ginger dissolves in my mouth.

Edward lives in Mount Darwin. He wears a loosely fitted army uniform that he has never taken off. He walks barefoot. We move barefoot too, running cross-country races in thorny fields and woods. Our feet have become flat and tough. Nothing can get through our skin — only the fear of cows. I'm scared of running through the fields. The cows tower above me. I reach their knees and sometimes when they don't want to eat grass anymore, they chase me. We can smell Edward coming up the road. Somebody gave him a floppy hat and he wears it upside down so he looks like a sailor. He carries a rusty tin, shaking it when he wants some coins. He cleans the road of old newspapers and uses them to eat on. I've seen him eat fried potatoes off newspapers. The oil blurs the ink causing a permanent stain. He then licks off the letters and swallows the headlines.

We like him coming to our shop. Dad gives him a Coke and we watch him drink it. He uses his rotten back teeth as an opener (his front ones are missing), hauls the bottle above his lips and lets the fluid flow without closing his throat until his eyes water. Dad sometimes gives him a cigarette but he doesn't smoke it. He takes a chameleon out of his large army pocket, places it on the counter, lights the cigarette and puts it in the chameleon's mouth. Even though he's always dressed for war, he's not allowed to fight on anyone's side. He's too crazy for that.

I recognize that empty licked-off gingerbread man face, that 'Edward' face on troubled Rhodesians. I call it broken. We have that face under our coloured hoods when we visit Victoria Falls. Our workers who sit behind the knitting machine, watching it move automatically from left to right, magically knitting jerseys, have that look. It's a blank look, a look of having given up hope.

PRETEND

Dad has a recording camera that shows film through a projector and two large revolving reels. As the wheels turn, the little brown boxes that contain our lives move in circles, showing moments not related but stuck onto each other.

I don't like playing pretend — pretending that there is no terror outside our garden fence or inside it. On film our motions are stiff and we move sideways like stick insects, standing in rank from tallest to shortest. There is no sound on the film. It reminds me of the time we stole a packet of cigarettes. We wanted to grow up faster and smoked behind the car. We were found out. Mom smudged our lips with the burning tip to make certain we wouldn't do it again. Our lips sizzled and blistered and that shut us up. Mute like our dog Puppy who plays death games with the chickens, destroying them before we have a chance to eat them. Dad tied a dead chicken around his neck and despite Puppy's frustration he couldn't get at it. He hung his head low. That shut Puppy up.

Dad is shaky with the camera and when we watch our lives again, the images move up and down restlessly. When someone else holds the machine, the picture is clear and dad can be in the story too. During the war we are caught on film on top of a truck filled with bags of mealie meal. A crowd of hungry hands waves dollars at us from ground level and we lift the sacks onto their eager heads.

I feel trapped in the reels. That's not how my life played out.